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Summary

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# Storytelling That Drives Bold Change

Featuring Frances X. Frei, Professor,  
Harvard Business School

Anne Morriss, Author

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# Storytelling That Drives Bold Change

## PRESENTERS:

**Frances X. Frei**, Professor, Harvard Business School

**Anne Morriss**, Author

## MODERATOR:

**Julie Devoll**, Editor for Special Projects and Webinars, *Harvard Business Review*

## Overview

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When tackling urgent organizational problems, leaders work hard to identify underlying causes, tap into a wide range of knowledge, and experiment with solutions. But once they've mapped out a plan, they must take one more step: crafting a story so compelling that it will harness their organizations' energy and direct it toward change.

Four keys to successful storytelling are: 1) Understanding your story so well you can describe it simply; 2) Honoring the past; 3) Having a persuasive mandate for change; and 4) Laying out a rigorous and optimistic path forward.

Storytelling is vital to ensure that leaders' messages extend across the organization, which is crucial in acting fast without causing collateral damage. Leaders must leverage their strengths and experiment with different modes of storytelling. Learning to effectively harness the uniqueness that each person brings, their "uncommon," is a competitive advantage of diversity.

## Context

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Anne Morriss and Frances Frei shared insights about the power of storytelling to drive change and offered practical storytelling.

## Key Takeaways

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### **There are four keys to leveraging storytelling as a driver of change.**

For leaders it is imperative to use stories to build the world they want their companies and people to live in. Four ways for leaders to leverage the power of storytelling are:

1. **Understand deeply, describe simply.** To explain something simply requires deep thought. To understand something so well that it can be explained clearly is hard work but pays off when each messenger going forward across the organization can carry the message effectively.

*“The real test is, if I describe it to you and you turn around and describe it to someone else, will they say it in the way I intended.”*

— Frances Frei, Harvard Business School

2. **Honor the past.** A leader who comes in wanting to change everything will encounter staunch resistance. It is important to recognize what is good about the organization and to assure people it will not change, so they will feel seen and will be more inclined to follow the new leader.

*“If we want to bring people down that path and invite them to jump off the cliff into this uncertain future, we have to reassure them that the things they love most about this organization are not going to change.”*

— Anne Morriss, Author

**3. Communicate a clear and compelling mandate for change.**

The point of the storytelling is to drive change and build urgency. Domino's pizza provides an example. The company was delivering on its promise of pizza in 30 minutes or less but was producing terrible pizza. To increase the organization's urgency, the CEO had a digital billboard in Times Square show scathing customer comments, which generated urgency to fix the problem.

**4. Get into the weeds.** Storytelling can be mistaken for lack of rigor. To lead change, it is critical to pair rigor with optimism. Data provides a key element of storytelling; credibility requires numeric grounding. But to be effective, the data must be curated for the story and the story must avoid the temptation to pass along all numbers.

**Storytelling plays a vital role in leadership.**

Leadership creates the conditions in which other people can thrive, in both the leaders' presence and in their absence. Each scenario involves a distinct toolkit.

- **The presence toolkit** includes inclusive leadership and working with direct reports.
- **The absence toolkit** requires creating conditions for people without direct interaction with the leader. Strategy and culture are the keys of absence leadership, and storytelling is the means of communicating strategy across an organization.

Presence	Absence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• High standards</li> <li>• Inclusive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy</li> <li>• Culture</li> </ul>

Leaders play a vital role in creating a simple story and repeating it often, so that everyone can retell it. It's important to survive the "telephone tag" test. The most successful example is that every employee in every Walmart can simply state the company strategy: everyday low prices.

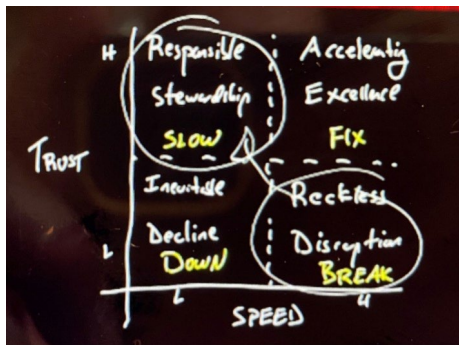
*“It’s senior leaders’ responsibility to write that first draft, and then translate it and transfer it in a way that other people receive it and can also be messengers of it.”*

—Anne Morriss, Author

## Speed is not the problem: Move fast and fix things.

Choosing between moving fast and taking care is a false choice. An optimal goal is high speed and high trust. Moving fast can mean breaking things, but with trust, when something is broken, it is quickly fixed.

Figure 1: Creating a high-speed, high-trust culture



Quadrants in the grid are:

- **Responsible stewardship (high trust, low speed).** Focusing solely on trust will not be successful. No one wants to take longer and do less, but moving too slowly is more common. There are opportunity costs to spending too much time building trust and failing at impact.
- **Reckless disruption (high speed, low trust).** The result of moving fast and breaking things leads to an infinite loop of addressing the symptom, not the cause, causing significant collateral damage.
- **Accelerating excellence** (high speed, high trust) allows companies to fix problems at a competitive pace.

*“Speed is not the problem. Breaking things is the problem.”*

—Frances Frei, Harvard Business School

### A framework for making change uses the days of the week.

To fix things quickly, it is important to act in the proper sequence. The days of the week serve as a metaphor for a staged approach. It's also useful to keep in mind what can be accomplished in a week and the need for a propensity for action.

#### Days of the Week Framework for Change

<b>Monday</b>	<p><b>Find the real problem.</b> Use curiosity to move past the symptoms. This leads to “Tuesday morning confidence.”</p> <p><i>“The presenting problem you have is unlikely to be the real problem.”</i></p> <p>— Anne Morriss, Author</p>
<b>Tuesday</b>	<p><b>Solve for trust.</b> Focus on knowing that you’re solving the right problem and identifying stakeholders that need to be involved. The core pillars of trust—authenticity, empathy, or logic—help address stakeholders’ concerns. Experiment flamboyantly on Tuesday, demonstrating clear motion even as the solutions are not apparent yet.</p>
<b>Wednesday</b>	<p><b>Make new friends.</b> Bring people together to solve the problem with inclusive leadership. The key is to surface the “uncommon,” not the “in common,” in order to combine the strengths of everyone in the organization.</p>
<b>Thursday</b>	<p><b>Tell a good story.</b> Build on the Mon-Wed work and use a simple, tested story to practice absence leadership.</p>
<b>Friday</b>	<p><b>Go as fast as you can.</b> This is the speed payoff, launching action as fast as possible, with the risk of breaking things significantly reduced by the work that has come before.</p>

At the end of the week, it's important that the payoff of the change is worth the pain. To see that the change efforts make a significant difference, ask: "if you could sprinkle magic dust on it and the world was different, would it be wildly worth it?"

**Storytelling can be implemented in a variety of ways, leveraging leaders' and organizations' strengths.**

A simple, often-repeated story can be delivered in different ways. In determining the medium, a simple way to increase the impact of storytelling is to dramatically increase the use of video, which communicates authenticity, logic, and empathy well.

In analyzing the occasion to share a story, leaders have choices of form, frequency, and forum. Leaders can lean into their communication strengths at the outset—be it storytelling at an all-hands meeting or through one-on-one communications. But it is important to move past one's comfort zone. Rely on iteration and experimentation to ensure the story is repeated regularly.

**Emotions are a potent leadership tool when used well.**

Emotions are vital for leaders, but it is important to be careful when projecting emotions. Emotions are clues to deeper truths, and certain emotions, such as frustration, are fuel for innovation. Because leaders' emotions have an outsized impact on the organization, control of emotions and how they are broadcast is a critical skill set. For example, anxiety, used intentionally, can create productive discomfort and focus on what otherwise might be avoided. Alternatively, generalized anxiety is unproductive.

*"We should curate the emotions because they're very contagious. And so we should make sure that the emotions that we're broadcasting are the emotions that we want to be contagious."*

*—Anne Morriss, Author*

## **Celebrating the “uncommon” is a competitive advantage of DEI done right.**

The value proposition of the “uncommon” is an essential leadership tool. It is natural to gravitate to what’s in common. But the benefits of focusing on the uncommon can be significant.

What’s in common is small, shown in Figure 2 in the yellow area. Bringing different “uncommons” (the green areas) to the table with respect adds value. Leaders succeed by having the humility to recognize that knowledge is only a small piece of the organization, and it’s vital to harness more.

Figure 2: The in common and uncommon



*“The currency of the uncommon is so much more valuable than the currency of the in common, and we instinctually go to the in common.”*

*—Frances Frei, Harvard Business School*

The value of the uncommon over the in common is why diversity is compelling. Inclusion is how to harness differences for competitive success. And equity is ultimately recognizing that all stakeholders want equal access to opportunity. Inclusion at the expense of others does not work, but when the payoff of the uncommon celebrates difference and promotes access to opportunity for all, it’s a huge competitive advantage.



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**Frances Frei** is a professor of Technology and Operations Management at Harvard Business School. Her research investigates how leaders create the conditions for organizations and individuals to thrive by designing for excellence in strategy, operations, and culture. She regularly advises organizations embarking on large-scale change initiatives, including embracing diversity and inclusion as a lever for significantly improving performance.



**Anne Morriss** is an entrepreneur, leadership coach, and founder of The Leadership Consortium (TLC), a first-of-its kind leadership accelerator that works to prepare emerging leaders for senior leadership. For the past 20 years, Anne has guided entrepreneurs, companies, and governments throughout the United States and Latin America on strategy, leadership, and organizational change.



**Julie Devoll** is editor for special projects and webinars at *Harvard Business Review* and director of marketing and communications for Harvard Business Review Press. In her role as marketing director, she is responsible for the marketing and PR strategy and execution for all HBR Press books and authors. In her editorial role, she programs webinars and events including identifying thought-leaders and creating content that adds value for Ad Sales clients, HBR subscribers, and webinar participants. Devoll graduated from Stonehill College with a BA in English and a minor in Mass Communications and Journalism.